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The works of William Faulkner hold a seemingly unshakable place in today's literary canon, earning his stories and novels not only a spot on the university Introduction to Literature syllabus, but as the focus of entire literature seminars. In 1992, Lance Lyday observed that "William Faulkner and his writings have now been the subject of more than 6,000 essays and reviews, more than 300 books, and about 500 dissertations—more than the total amount of critical attention devoted to any other writer in English except Shakespeare."[1] Faulkner's works, however, have not always garnered such an outpouring of critical response. Before Faulkner's 1950 reception of the Nobel Prize for Literature skyrocketed him to literary fame, critical response to his early work was sparse: ten pieces on *The Sound and The Fury*, seven on *Light in August*, and only one on *As I Lay Dying*. In fact, in 1945, all seventeen of his novels were out of print, concrete evidence that his work had fallen into neglect.[2] Nor were his novels universally lauded. Early reviews of *The Sound and The Fury* (1929) were often unfavorable, remarking that "the theme and the characters are trivial, unworthy of the enormous and complex craftsmanship expended on them," or that after finishing the novel, the "reader feels tempted to apply for admission to the nearest insane asylum."[3] Early comments on *As I Lay Dying* continued in much the same vein, with one reviewer complaining that she is "maddened that Mr. Faulkner

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[1] Lance Lyday, "Faulkner Criticism: Will It Ever End?" *South Carolina Review* 25 (1992): 183.

[2] Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*," in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, eds. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1960), 96.

[3] Clifton Fadiman, "Hardly Worth While," *Nation,* January 15, 1930, 75; Howard Rockey, "Fiction, Largely European and Very Good in the Average," Philadelphia *Inquirer*, November 30, 1929, 18.

should lavish his talents on material which is so grotesque and so essentially insignificant," and another asserting that Faulkner's novel "reveals a blind, self-indulgent obsession with death and morbidity."[4] Although Faulkner's early novels did receive a few favorable reviews, even several complimentary comparisons to Joyce, one writer's reaction to *Sanctuary* is much more typical: *Sanctuary* "leaves one with the impression of having been vomited bodily from the sensual cruelty of its pages."[5]

Implicit behind many of these early responses to Faulkner's work stands the accusation that Faulkner somehow refuses to portray the South "realistically," that his work reflects no objective, morally uplifting correspondence to the phenomenal world. In "A Yankee Looks at Dixie" (1936), Katharine Fullerton Gerould indicts Faulkner, along with James Gould and Erskine Caldwell, for replacing "the old sickening sweetness" of Southern fiction with a "new sickening sourness," and remarks that although she has been assured by "*bona fide* Mississippians that Mr. Faulkner has only to walk out of his own front gate to encounter all his characters in the flesh," she feels certain that "*Sanctuary* and 'A Rose for Emily' derive to some extent from Mr. Faulkner's personal morbidness." While Gerould doubts the accuracy of Faulkner's character portraits, she contradictorily asserts that the sheer weight of "callousness, bigotry, and stupidity" among characters in Southern fiction necessarily reflects the reality that "citizenship in Dixie is on a lower level than elsewhere." Ultimately, Gerould longs for literature rooted in her version of historical reality:

> A slavish admirer of the great Virginians of history, I have wanted nothing so much as to be 'shown' a people still stamped with their seal. For their sake I have been patient, all my life, with mocking birds, okra, and Southern accents. It is with a sickening disappointment that this particular Yankee turns at last from the fiction in which the magnolias rot and smell to heaven. It is a very depressing literature, my friends![6]

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[4] Edith H. Walton, "An Eccentric Novel," New York *Sun,* November 7, 1930, 31; Edwin Muir, "New Novels," *Listener*, October 16, 1935, 681.

[5] Harry L. Martin, "Horrifying Tale Set in Memphis," Memphis *Evening Appeal*, March 26, 1931, 3.

[6] Katherine Fullerton Gerould, "A Yankee Looks at Dixie," *American Mercury* 37 (1936): 218-220.

The month after Gerould's article appeared, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren responded with "Dixie Looks at Mrs. Gerould." Identifying her as a "practitioner. . . of the current socio-economico-pathologico-Marxist critical method,"[7] Brooks and Warren dismantle Gerould's arguments through the very kind of close reading that will later be touted as New Criticism. (Interestingly, in this essay, Brooks and Warren refer to Marxist criticism as "the new criticism" [588].) Brooks and Warren argue that Faulkner, along with several other Southern writers, must be judged on their own merits, not against a Marxist agenda, or some constructed historical standard of a "nice" Southerner.

The story of Faulkner's move from an obscure, ambivalently-received Southern gothicist to a Modernist icon forms the basis of Lawrence Schwartz's fascinating study, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism*. Schwartz focuses on Malcolm Cowley's impact on Faulkner's career, pointing out that "many literary historians and critics see" the publication of Cowley's edition of *The Portable Faulkner* (1946) "as the turning point in Faulkner's literary reputation."[8] Schwartz argues that the New Critics, represented by Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, and the New York intellectuals, represented by Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, and Richard Blackmur, fused to advance the Cold War cultural agenda. This new literary consensus used Faulkner's work, reanalyzing it as the representative of "ahistorical art-for-art's sake formalism," the basis of a postwar American aesthetic determined to reject "naturalism and socially conscious literature [which] came to be identified with the 'totalitarianism' of the Soviet Union and Stalinist politics."[9] While Schwartz acknowledges that Cleanth Brooks "would come to dominate the New Critical interpretation of Faulkner,"[10] his study relegates Brooks' contributions to a relatively minor position, all but ignoring Brooks' dozens of articles and book-length studies on Faulkner.

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[7] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, "Dixie Looks at Mrs. Gerould," *American Review* 6 (1936): 587; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

[8] Lawrence H. Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 10.

[9] Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation*, 209.

[10] Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation*, 19.

Two book-length treatments of Cleanth Brooks apply a corrective to Schwartz's oversight. Lewis Simpson, in *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work*, collects a series of essays valorizing Brooks' contributions to the twentieth-century American literary scene. While Simpson acknowledges that, for over twenty years, Brooks "devoted his most sustained and thorough attention" to Faulkner's work, the main thrust of this collection is to "elaborate the complex variety of his critical motives and interests," an agenda which necessarily treats his connection with Faulkner as one among many.[11] In *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism*, Mark Royden Winchell attempts to understand Brooks' relationship to modern literary criticism by offering "an extended critical biography."[12] Though Winchell pointedly sprinkles references to Faulkner throughout his text in anticipation of developing the Brooks-Faulkner connection, the chapter developing that relationship focuses exclusively on Brooks' *The Yoknapatawpha Country*, a volume which Winchell claims "has set the standard for the hundreds of books and thousands of essays on Faulkner that have appeared since."[13]

While Brooks certainly joins other critics already engaged in Faulkner's makeover, his role in shaping Faulkner into a modernist icon is not negligible, nor is it confined to *The Yoknapatawpha Country*. From Brooks' first printed mention of Faulkner in "Dixie Looks at Mrs. Gerould," he argues for a different approach to reading Faulkner. He consistently denigrates readers who search Faulkner's texts for Marxist ideology, or who insist on a Jamesian realism, or who speculate on Faulkner's literary intentions. By arguing for a close reading of texts that underscores the importance of structure and form, Brooks helped move Faulkner criticism in new directions, repackaging him as a Modernist writer whose works were ahistorical, apolitical, and dominated by structure.

Among Faulkner's few full-length, pre-Nobel Prize critical responses, three stand out in terms of Brooks' later reading of

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[11] Lewis P. Simpson, "Introduction," *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), xx, xv.

[12] Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), xi.

[13] Winchell, *Rise of Modern Criticism*, 310.

Faulkner. In 1939, George Marion O'Donnell's essay, "Faulkner's Mythology," responded to Faulkner's many detractors by arguing that he "is really a traditional moralist" who responds to anti-traditional forces of the modern South by creating an overarching myth built around the symbols of the traditional Sartoris family and the anti-traditional Snopes family. O'Donnell argues that this myth runs throughout his works, imparting unity to his work and "giving it, at times, the significance that belongs to great myth."[14] While "Faulkner's Mythology" foreshadows Brooks' work by insisting that Faulkner's novels stand in relationship to each other, Brooks takes O'Donnell's idea much further, and does not see Faulkner's works as primarily depicting "the Southern social-economic-ethical tradition,"[15] a condition external to the texts, nor does Brooks confine the texts' tensions to the two mythological principles of Sartoris and Snopes, a division Brooks might argue is reductive.

Also in 1939, Conrad Aiken published "William Faulkner: The Novel as Form." While Aiken observes that "Mr. Faulkner's style, though often brilliant and always interesting, is all too frequently downright bad," he offers a partial excuse for the "bad" style by pointing out that the sentences reflect the novels' "whole elaborate method of deliberately withheld meaning, of progressive and partial and delayed disclosure."[16] By connecting the confusion of the sentences with the apparent confusion of the text, Aiken raises the possibility that Faulkner's "hopelessly flawed" form represents a design, an assertion which Brooks will vigorously pursue.

A third influential essay was Malcolm Cowley's "Introduction" to *The Portable Faulkner* (1946). As Schwartz argues, Cowley's efforts on Faulkner's behalf were enormously influential: he reintroduced Faulkner to America in this accessible form, urging the public as well as the literary establishment to reevaluate the writings of this relatively obscure Mississippian. Like O'Donnell, Cowley urges readers to see the Yoknapatawpha novels as segments of a whole, each "part of the same living pattern" which constitutes

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[14] George Marion O'Donnell, "Faulkner's Mythology," *The Kenyon Review* 1 (1939): 285.

[15] O'Donnell, "Faulkner's Mythology," 285.

[16] Conrad Aiken, "William Faulkner: The Novel as Form," in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism,* Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery, eds. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1960), 136, 138.

Faulkner's legendary South.[17] Although Cowley maintains that "almost all of [Faulkner's] novels have some weakness in structure," effectively calling into question his status as a novelist, Cowley believes that the larger idea standing behind his work still qualifies him as "an epic or bardic poet in prose."[18] While Brooks agrees with Cowley's reading of the Yoknapatawpha stories as all pieces of one creative fabric, his critical method differs radically from Cowley's. Instead of looking for clues to the novels and stories in Faulkner's life, as Cowley does at the beginning of his essay, or suggesting that Faulkner's goal is to comment on the South's "moral confusion and social decay,"[19] Brooks insists that the texts themselves hold the interpretive key. Correctly manipulating this key allows Brooks to uncover a strong structure in Faulkner's work, a practice which validates Brooks' critical method and calls for a radical re-reading of Faulkner's prose.

Key to understanding Brooks' treatment of Faulkner is an understanding of the principles of New Criticism. In "Cleanth Brooks and the New Criticism," Roger Kimball points out the inaccuracy of the popular tendency to reduce New Criticism to "close reading," since "all attentive reading—especially attentive reading of a demanding text—[is] 'close reading'."[20] More central to New Criticism, Kimball argues, is the intense emphasis on structure, an emphasis made clear in an encyclopedia article Brooks wrote in the early 1960s. New Criticism, Brooks writes, encourages

> a specifically *literary* criticism as distinguished from a study of sources or of social backgrounds or of the history of ideas or of the political and social effects of literature. The New Criticism has tended to explore the structure of the work rather than the mind and personality of the artist or the reactions of his various readers. No one is forgetting. . . that literary works are written by human beings, and may exert all sorts of effects upon the human beings who read them. But the "new critics" have characteristically attempted to deal with the literary object itself rather than with its origins and effects.[21]

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[17] Cowley, "Introduction," 99.
[18] Cowley, "Introduction," 105, 109.
[19] Cowley, "Introduction," 103.
[20] Roger Kimball, "Cleanth Brooks and the New Criticism," *The New Criterion* 10.2 (1991): 23.
[21] Qtd. in Kimball, "Cleanth Brooks," 23.

Brooks elaborates on a major facet of structure in his essay "Irony as a Principle of Structure" (1951), where he argues that all poetry contains irony, a structuring principle that he identifies with "the internal pressures" of a text which "balance and mutually support each other."[22] Although in this essay Brooks refers specifically to poetry, he uses similar methods to approach fiction, always underscoring the centrality of a proper understanding and appreciation of structure to the critic who wishes to do his job properly.

Brooks' insistence that readers focus on "the literary object itself" rather than a work's sources, social background, or possible political agenda, shows up early on not only in the response to Gerould (a "practitioner. . . of the current socio-economico-pathologico-Marxist critical method"[23]), but in his essay "What Deep South Literature Needs" (1942). Responding to critics who mistakenly read Southern literature in order assuage their intense interest in things Southern, or to uncover Southern politics, Brooks writes that "poetry, drama, and fiction at their best dramatize issues rather than argue toward solutions—they build up dramatic tensions rather than 'making a case for' a particular program."[24] He continues by cautioning readers that if "we insist that literature give a program, under penalty of being damned as irresponsible or complacent if it fails to, we shall misconstrue its purposes and probably end up by misreading it" (9). Brooks believes that readers who hunt for a program in Faulkner's work will be disappointed, because Faulkner "is not indulging in a sardonic and cynical description of decay nor is he propagandizing for a particular program which will make all shiny, sanitary, and aseptic" (9). Instead of searching for non-existent social ideology, Brooks urges readers to recognize that "the healthiest aspect of all [in these texts] is the effort of the writers to find a form for their material," an impulse he particularly connects with the younger writers such as Faulkner (30). And while he acknowledges the partial validity of the claim that Faulkner's

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[22] Cleanth Brooks, "Irony as a Principle of Structure," *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 2nd ed. Ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 760.

[23] Brooks and Warren, "Dixie Looks at Mrs. Gerould," 587.

[24] Cleanth Brooks, "What Deep South Literature Needs," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, September 19, 1942, 9; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

style "gets out of control," he maintains that Faulkner's unique style "tends to become an adjunct to the larger form" of his novels and short stories, a form that Brooks finds especially pleasing because "it carries no liberal slogans and propagandizes for no immediate program" (30).

Schwartz faults Brooks for not recognizing the scope of Faulkner's genius in this early essay.[25] However, I believe Brooks lays in this essay a significant foundation for the later critical attention he directs toward Faulkner. Contrary to the many reviewers who scoured Faulkner's texts for clues to a Southern identity or a political agenda, Brooks maintains that Faulkner has no "program," an assertion that implicitly links Faulkner to Joyce, Pound, and Eliot, other high modernists who were currently being read as ahistorical and apolitical. Brooks also insists that the most admirable quality of Faulkner's works is the attention he gives to form, an assertion that not only affects one's reading of Faulkner, but that also influences the nature of subsequent critical activity on Faulkner's novels.

Brooks offers an example of a "proper" reading of Faulkner in *Understanding Fiction*, a textbook he co-authored with Robert Penn Warren in 1943. Designed as a companion volume to Brooks and Warren's successful 1938 textbook *Understanding Poetry*, *Understanding Fiction* begins by outlining the editors' critical theory in a compelling manner which profoundly impacted the way literature was taught in the college classroom.[26] In the prefatory "Letter to the Teacher," Brooks and Warren claim that "the student can best be brought to an appreciation of the more broadly human values implicit in fiction by a course of study which aims at the close analytical and interpretative reading of concrete examples," a goal that students can accomplish by reaching an "understanding [of] the various elements which go to make up fiction and by understanding their relationships to each other in the whole construct."[27] Illuminating the "problem of the nature and structure of fiction" forms the basis of Brooks and Warren's proposed plan of

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[25] Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation*, 19.

[26] Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism*, 185.

[27] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction* (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1943), x; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

study (x), and the editors urge teachers to heighten their students' awareness that the various elements of a fictional piece interrelate through conflict and tension which eventually reach some sort of resolution. This emphasis on structural irony falls in line with Brooks' previous comments on Faulkner, and forms the basis of his explication of "A Rose for Emily."

Brooks and Warren begin their explication by pointing out that the "distinction between reality and illusion has blurred out" for Miss Emily (410), a tension which is joined by the conflict between life and death, between her pride and the town's conventions, between her self-enforced isolation and the community's ownership of her, between her role as community idol and scapegoat, between her dignity and her madness. The "meaning" of the story rests in the resolution of these various tensions, and only the attentive reader can move beyond the story's sensational ending to understand that the story's structure reveals that "just as the horror of her deed lies outside the ordinary life of the community, so the magnificence of her independence lies outside their ordinary virtues" (414). This reading of Faulkner's twisted tale confers an elevated significance on the text, one that calls for a certain type of reader while claiming a certain depth and morality to the most bizarre moments in Faulkner's work. The process of remaking Faulkner is well underway.

Brooks' first major critical essay devoted entirely to Faulkner was the 1951 "*Absalom, Absalom*: The Definition of Innocence." Brooks begins his essay by arguing that while *Absalom, Absalom!* "has meant something very powerful and important to all sorts of people," much more important than determining "what we can make of" the novel is determining "what [the novel] makes of itself."[28] By immediately announcing his intention to read *Absalom, Absalom!* as "more than a bottle of Gothic sauce to be used to spice up our own preconceptions about the history of American society"(544), Brooks denigrates other critical methods which look for answers beyond the text. He dismisses those critics who focus on aspects of violence or horror as offering "a glib Gothicizing of the novel," and says that critics who read the novel hoping to uncover a "program" are "forcing its meaning

[28] Cleanth Brooks, "*Absalom, Absalom*: Definition of Innocence," *Sewanee Review* 59 (1951): 543-544; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

into an overshallow sociological interpretation"(553). As for those critics who become enthralled with source studies, Brooks responds that, "Faulkner may or may not have read Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*; but on the evidence of *Absalom, Absalom!* he would certainly understand it"(550). In other words, one need not comb Faulkner's reading list in order to judge whether or not he grasps a certain idea. The text itself supplies sufficient evidence.

What does Brooks offer in place of these methods? Instead of looking beyond a text, Brooks searches for answers within a text. Thus, instead of employing a cultural or literary definition of innocence, Brooks urges the reader to determine how Faulkner himself uses the term. A close examination of the novel reveals that Sutpen's innocence consists of thinking that justice is enough—"that there is no claim that cannot be satisfied by sufficient money payment"(547). Brooks believes that "innocence of this sort can properly be claimed as a special characteristic of modern man" which "flourishes particularly in a secularized society" (546). Notably, Brooks uses the term "modern" five times in this essay in reference to Sutpen's innocence, a move that allows Brooks to spin the novel away from O'Donnell's and Cowley's legendary South in order to link *Absalom, Absalom!* with the secularized modern condition. He also points out that Sutpen shares this quality of innocence with Sophocles' Oedipus and Shakespeare's Macbeth. Finally, Brooks rewrites Sutpen as both the representative of the modern condition, and a classic tragic figure, a character that stands outside of time and culture.

Not only does Brooks assert that Faulkner's own definitions shed sufficient light on the text, but he insists that the text's meaning can be uncovered through careful attention to the novel's form. Instead of joining Cowley in criticizing Faulkner's problematic structure, Brooks pursues Aiken's suggestion that Faulkner's use of structure is an intentional reflection of theme. Throughout *Absalom, Absalom!*, Brooks sees dichotomies: Judith's character contrasted with Henry's, Sutpen's code contrasted with the town's, Sutpen's first wife contrasted with his second, the white Sutpen boxing with his black servants, Sutpen's disreputability contrasted with Coldfield's uprightness, and Bon contrasted with Sutpen like "a mirror image, a reversed shadow

of his father"(550). These dichotomies form the novel's "general moral pattern"(554), giving the text its balanced ironic tension. Brooks argues that *Absalom, Absalom!* is formal tragedy, and that Sutpen achieves "tragic dignity," a "feat [that] is almost unique in our times"(556). In this important essay, Brooks showcases his critical method. He reminds his readers of the weaknesses inherent in other critical approaches while simultaneously touting the rich insights which result from close attention to the work's own ideas and structure.

"*Absalom, Absalom*: The Definition of Innocence" was quickly followed by "Notes on Faulkner's *Light in August*" (1951), and "Primitivism in *The Sound and The Fury*" (1952), but it was not until 1963 that Brooks' first major book on Faulkner appeared, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. Winchell reports that Brooks rather accidentally fell into this project when

> Monroe Spears, who had just taken over the editorship of the *Sewanee Review* from John Palmer, wrote in the contributors' notes to the magazine that Cleanth Brooks was writing a book on Faulkner. Because that was an inaccurate surmise on Spears' part, Cleanth's first inclination was to ask that a correction be run in the next issue. On second thought, he decided that it might not be such a bad idea for him to write a book on Faulkner.[29]

Brooks begins his study by again clarifying the distance between his critical approach and those critics who "take [Faulkner's] fiction to be sociology,"[30] or those critics who become "symbol-mongers" (6). He intends to avoid these two faults by attending to the critic's central task: "to determine and evaluate the meaning of the work in the fullness of its depth and amplitude" (8). After foregrounding two key tensions running throughout Faulkner's works—the relationship between "plain folks," the aristocrats, and the African Americans, and the surface conflict between Christianity and a pagan reverence of nature—Brooks proceeds to trace tensions throughout Faulkner's work, always insisting that a work's meaning can be uncovered by

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[29] Winchell, *Rise of Modern Criticism*, 309-10.

[30] Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 4; hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

a close examination of the text itself and through careful attention to structure.

Examination of one section of Brooks' explication of *Light in August* serves to illustrate certain aspects of his method. Just as in his 1951 essay on *Absalom, Absalom!*, Brooks insists that readers look to the text itself for clues to a word's connotations. Here the word is "lynch." Brooks warns us that "if we use the word 'lynching' loosely and carelessly, we shall be in danger of missing the relation of Joe Christmas to the community he has defied, and more importantly, that of Percy Grimm to the community he claims to represent"(52). It is this tight attention to words which often encouraged Brooks' rivals to reduce his method to mere "close reading." However, far from seeking to simplify the text, Brooks feels that determining a word's proper meaning will serve to illuminate the text and will guard against the impulse to wrench ideas out of context for self-serving, political aims. We see a second aspect of his critical method as Brooks develops the idea of community that he finds running throughout Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha stories and novels. Brooks believes that "the community is the powerful though invisible force that quietly exerts itself in so much of Faulkner's work. It is the circumambient atmosphere, the essential ether of Faulkner's fiction" (52). The careful reader perceives this "essential ether": the careless reader finds the community invisible, and so "may miss the meaning of the work" (53). How does Faulkner communicate the concept of community in his work? Once again, Brooks maintains that Faulkner creates dichotomies, and that "a little reflection will show that nearly all the characters in *Light in August* bear a special relation to the community" (53). They are all outcasts, and the novel's meaning rests in understanding the ironic tension between the Reverend Mr. Hightower or Joe Christmas and the community of Jefferson.

While Winchell observes that Brooks "examines Faulkner's little postage stamp of soil as if it had a real history and a real geography," in a manner similar to Cowley,[31] Brooks pushes the imaginative boundaries of Yoknapatawpha County much further. Brooks fills

[31] Winchell, *Rise of Modern Criticism*, 310.

The Yoknapatawpha Country with charts and time-lines, ranging from a "Chronology of Events in *Sanctuary*,"[32] to a three-page accounting, complete with "T" ledger accounts, of how Ratliff outsmarted Flem (404-06). Eight pages are devoted to "What We Know about Thomas Sutpen and His Children," a three-column chart which details a "Fact or Event" in the Sutpen family history, the "Ultimate Authority" on which that information is based, and the "Page" on which that information can be found (429-36). Brooks next serves up genealogies for all the major families in Yoknapatawpha: the Compsons, the McCaslins, the Stevens, the Sartorises, the Sutpens, and the Snopeses. Cumulatively, the charts and genealogies present Faulkner's stories and novels as a closed system, a complete, self-contained, *real* universe. Brooks approaches Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha stories and novels not only as a unified whole, but as presenting an internally consistent world where a reader's confusion results from sloppy reading or from the fact that the vital clue exists in an as yet unwritten tale. Perhaps Brooks' attitude toward Yoknapatawpha partially rests in his only conversation with Faulkner. In November of 1948, Brooks met Faulkner in a Manhattan bar; after touching on a variety of subjects, Brooks eased the conversation around to Faulkner's work, confessing that he had always wondered why Uncle Buck lost a desired slave and gained an undesired wife in the poker game in "Was." Faulkner replied that "It wasn't in that poker game that it happened, but in one I haven't written yet. I have so many stories in my head."[33] While some critics might interpret Faulkner's remark as an indication of the open-endedness of his work, a refusal to enforce unnatural closure, Brooks seems to have understood Faulkner to mean that the world of Yoknapatawpha existed whole in his mind, a complete composition which—like the music of Mozart—merely required a genius to transcribe the vision onto paper.

While all Faulkner's novels hint at this genius, Brooks believes that nowhere is it expressed more fully than in *Absalom, Absalom!*, where the difficult structure perfectly conveys theme:

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[32] Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, 387.

[33] Qtd. in Winchell, *Rise of Modern Criticism*, 307.

> *Absalom, Absalom!* is in many respects the most brilliantly written of all Faulkner's novels, whether one considers its writing line by line and paragraph by paragraph, or its structure, in which we are moved up from one suspended note to a higher suspended note and on up further still to an intolerable climax. The intensity of the book is a function of the structure. The deferred and suspended resolutions are necessary if the great scenes are to have their full vigor and significance. . . . There are actually few instances in modern fiction of a more perfect adaptation of form to matter and of an intricacy that justifies itself at every point through the significance and intensity which it makes possible.[34]

Faulkner's genius, finally, rests in his mastery of form. Winchell correctly observes that after this lavish praise of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Brooks devotes himself in later critical pieces "to the purely expository task of untangling the mystery of how we know what actually happens in the plot,"[35] the implication being that so perfect a form, once foregrounded, resists further interpretive moves.

While Brooks shifts his focus off the Yoknapatawpha saga in *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (1978), he continues his emphasis on form and tight reading. However, one important new strain appears: Brooks overtly connects Faulkner with Eliot and Joyce. Although critics had infrequently compared Faulkner and Joyce almost from the beginning of Faulkner's career, this study represents Brooks' first full-fledged attempt to align Faulkner with these two mammoth High Modernist writers. Brooks maintains that "Eliot and Joyce. . . provided Faulkner with the proper alloy wherewith to give tensile strength and a cutting edge to what might have proved in its purer state too soft a metal for Faulkner's purposes."[36] Exposure to Eliot and Joyce tempered Faulkner's romantic tendencies, thus helping Faulkner learn how to use "Yoknapatawpha as a special lens that allows us to view with illuminating magnification and emphasis our own modernity" (xii). Throughout Brooks' treatment of Faulkner,

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[34] Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, 323-24.

[35] Winchell, *Rise of Modern Criticism*, 322.

[36] Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), xi; hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

he emphasized Faulkner's apolitical, ahistorical stance; now he places Faulkner alongside Eliot and Joyce who for decades had been read as articulating universal human values and truths. The claim that Faulkner's work spoke to a universal human condition was certainly not a new one: in fact, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech Faulkner himself points out that his fiction deals with "the old universal truth lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed," a claim that Irving Howe quickly validates in his 1952 *William Faulkner: A Critical Study*. Although one could read *Toward Yoknapatawpha* as a rehashing of well-trod critical ground, perhaps a more fruitful approach would be to question what function this late reassertion of Faulkner's universality serves.

For upwards of thirty years, Brooks and the other New Critics held sway in America's university literature departments, loudly proclaiming the intrinsic value of texts characterized by ambiguity, difficult structure, irony, and an almost impenetrable surface. Whether Brooks and his colleagues promoted these texts in order to advance Cold War politics as Schwartz suggests, or as a way to exclude the culturally and racially diverse as Kalaidjian suggests,[37] their own writings indicate that they connected these works with the Western literary tradition in which they had been trained. In his 1991 essay entitled "The Remaking of the Canon," Brooks remembers his early schooling in a "classical academy" in West Tennessee where "great" books such as "Ceasar's *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*, Cicero's *Orations*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Xenophon's *Anabasis*, and the first three books of Homer's *Iliad*" were upheld as the standard.[38] Kalaidjian, commenting on this essay, observes that Brooks "quite frankly related that, as a depression-era teacher, he sought to reproduce this classical standard of taste with Robert Penn Warren in their *Understanding Poetry* text for modern students, who, he claims 'could not distinguish between a good book and a bad.'"[39] Brooks wrote *Toward Yoknapatawpha* in

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[37] Walter Kalaidjian, "Marketing Modern Poetry and the Southern Public Sphere," in *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, Rereading*, eds. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 315.

[38] Cleanth Brooks, "The Remaking of the Canon," *Partisan Review* 58 (1991): 351.

[39] Kalaidjian, "Marketing Modern Poetry," 314.

the midst of the theoretical revolution of the post-Vietnam era,[40] in a time when he perhaps felt the need to strongly reassert the canon he had helped to establish.

Much recent Faulkner criticism has directly overturned Brooks' critical agenda. For example, in the preface to *The Ink of Melancholy* (1990), Andre Bleikasten writes that although he attempts "to concentrate on the texts themselves," he supplements this explication by "attend[ing] to their implications in biographical, sociocultural, and historical terms."[41] Daniel J. Singal, in his introduction to *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* (1997), insists that "we can learn much about his art by relating it to the cultural and intellectual discourse of his era—and much about that era by coming to terms with his art."[42] And Doreen Fowler and Ann Abadie weigh in by offering *Faulkner and Race* (1987), a collection of essays that attempt to answer the question of whether or not a "white man [can] enter a black consciousness or render accurately black lives"[43] One can almost see Brooks throwing up his hands in frustration. Yet even though critics have once again turned to questions of biographical and cultural context, Brooks' influence can still be felt. Readers still seek to unravel Jefferson's familial relationships, and still argue over exactly what Faulkner meant by a certain word. Just step into a Faulkner seminar and listen for a few minutes.

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[40] Kalaidjian, "Marketing Modern Poetry," 314.

[41] Andre Bleikasten, *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from* The Sound and the Fury ***to*** Light in August (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), xii.

[42] Daniel J. Singal, *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 2.

[43] Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, eds. "Introduction," in *Faulkner and Race* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), vii.